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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 BAMAKO 000003

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SUBJECT: A NORTHERN MALI NEW YEAR'S SPECIAL: GRENADES,
GUNFIRE, AND THE "GUIDE"

REF: A. 08 BAMAKO 00800
1B. 07 BAMAKO 01356
1C. BAMAKO 00968
1D. BAMAKO 00482

Classified By: Political Officer Aaron Sampson, Embassy Bamako, for
reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

1.(C) Summary: Northern Mali rang in the new year with grenade attacks targeting three Tuareg leaders in Gao, a faux-offensive against Ibrahim Bahanga near Tessalit, an impromptu visit by the "frere guide" Muammar Qadhafi that caught even President Amadou Toumani Toure off-guard, and a meeting of the Algiers Accords oversight committee in Kidal intended to pave the way for an estimated 300 fighters loyal to the Tuareg rebel Alliance for Democracy and Change (ADC) to return to their barracks in Kidal. Meanwhile, on northern Mali's eastern frontier, Arabs in Timbuktu began organizing a self-defense militia of their own, ostensibly to defend members of Mali's Arab communities from threats posed by Tuareg rebels and AQIM. End Summary.

Grenades in Gao

2.(C) Unknown assailants threw hand grenades at the residences of three separate Tuareg leaders in the town of Gao on New Year's Day. Three individuals, including one attacker, were killed and two others wounded. Among the dead were an elderly woman and a young girl working as a domestic servant. None of the targeted Tuareg leaders, which included the second vice president of Mali's National Assembly, Assarid ag Imbarcaoune, were injured. The other residences attacked belonged to High Council of Collectivities representative, Azaz ag Doudagdag, and the Malian Agency for Northern Development's (ADN) Director, Mohamed ag Mahmoud Akiline. After the attacks, the Governor of Gao, General Amadou Baba Toure, told the Embassy that the attackers belonged to the Songhai/Peuhl militia known as the Ganda-Izo.

General Toure said he believed those responsible for throwing the grenades were among those caught during Mali's sweep of the Ganda-Izo in September 2008 and later released (Ref. A).

3.(C) Imbarcaoune, ag Doudagdag, and Akiline are all Imghad Tuaregs aligned with President Toure. As core members of the Tuareg nobility in the region of Gao, they exert considerable influence over local government affairs. In November 2007 Akiline claimed he, the Governor of Gao, and the Algerian Consul to Gao were the targets of another assassination attempt allegedly hatched by the Gandakoy (Ref. B). As the Director of the ADN in Gao, Akiline manages a large amount of money intended to serve as economic reinsertion projects for former Tuareg combatants from northern Mali's 1991-1996 rebellion.

Gunfire Near Kidal

4.(C) On January 2 the Malian army launched an "offensive" against Tuareg rebels loyal to Ibrahim Bahanga north of Kidal near Tessalit. One local newspaper described the operation as the Malian military's "New Year's gift" to Bahanga and reported several hours of serious fighting. Information acquired from more reliable sources, however, indicate that the "offensive" was nothing more than a long-distance exchange of gunfire. Hama ag Sid'Ahmed, spokesman for Bahanga's Northern Mali Tuareg Alliance for Change (ATNMC), released a statement after the incident claiming that Malian troops had attacked the ATNMC's base in Telakak, east of Tessalit. The statement claimed that four Malian soldiers were wounded and that the Malian military later used its ultra-light planes to evacuate injured personnel from the town of Tinzawaten. Sid'Ahmed ended his statement with a warning that additional "offensives" were likely within the coming days.

5.(C) It is unclear whether Bahanga was among those involved in the January 2 faux-offensive. After harassing the Malian military and civilian population in western-central Mali during the final week of December 2008 (Ref. C), Bahanga's group reportedly split into two or more columns with one of these retreating into Mauritania and another - perhaps with Bahanga aboard - headed for the region of Kidal. One Malian official told the Embassy on January 2 that Mali believed Bahanga was among those engaged by Malian troops led by Col. Elhadj Gamou north of Kidal, and that Malian forces on the

BAMAKO 00000003 002 OF 003

other side of northern Mali had cut off a separate group of rebels loyal to Bahanga somewhere along the Mauritanian frontier. On December 31 a Malian newspaper republished a report entitled "Mauritanie-Mali, ca se gate!" originally posted by Mauritanian internet site, www.taqadoumy.com, regarding alleged Mauritanian support for Ibrahim Bahanga. Although we have no way of evaluating this report, it appears to corroborate information previously provided the Embassy (Ref. D.).

"Frere Guide" Descends

6.(C) So-called "frere Guide" Muammar Qadhafi arrived in Bamako with almost no advance warning on January 3. Less than two hours before Qadhafi's arrival, a senior government official told the Embassy that Mali had only just learned of the Guide's intention to divert to Mali and that President Toure was in the southern town of Koutiala and would therefore be unable to make it back to Bamako in time for Qadhafi's arrival. The task of "welcoming" Qadhafi therefore fell to Prime Minister Modibo Sidibe.

7.(C) True to form, the self-styled "King of African Kings" popped in without advance notice to delve into Mali's internal affairs. In Bamako, Qadhafi issued a statement to the press urging Mali to help keep Africa free from western "guardianship" through opposition to the presence of international forces on the continent. Qadhafi also delivered a message of support for negotiations with the Tuareg rebel ADC. In addition to meeting with President Toure (who sped back to Bamako from Koutiala), Qadhafi reportedly met with unknown Tuareg leaders in Bamako. He also visited a number of Libyan financed projects, including the cultural center next to the U.S. Embassy, the shell of recently purchased high-rise hotel project situated within shouting distance of Bamako's two other Libyan-owned hotels, and the work site of the enormous "MALIBYA" Ministerial city complex which has enjoyed no tangible progress since 2005.

ADC Fighters Return to Kidal

8.(C) Qadhafi's arrival was particularly inopportune as it coincided with preparations by Mali, Algeria, and the ADC to welcome an estimated 300 members of the ADC back to their barracks in Kidal. The return festivities were originally scheduled for mid-December, then January 3, then January 4, and now January 5. Minister of Territorial Administration, General Kafougouna Kone, left Bamako for Kidal on the morning of January 5 along with the Algerian Ambassador to Mali and ADC leader Iyad ag Ghali. Any Libyan involvement currently appears to be limited to words of support formulated from afar. One Malian official told the Embassy that Mali believed Qadhafi was on the point of expelling Bahanga's family from Libya, although it is unclear how such a move would help Mali corral Bahanga himself. Several former members of Bahanga's ATNMC, including Hassan Fagaga, are expected to be among those returning to Kidal. In a particularly disingenuous bit of spin, even for the ATNMC, Bahanga's father-in-law and spokesman Hama ag Sid'Ahmed told an Algerian newspaper that the ATNMC had not received an invitation to attend the meeting in Kidal and therefore would not participate.

Et tu, Timbuktu?

9.(C) As Malian, Algerian, and Tuareg leaders were working to demilitarize the region of Kidal, Malian Arabs in Timbuktu moved in the opposite direction. On December 31 Danna Moulaye, an Arab Berabiche leader from Timbuktu, told the Embassy that Malian Arabs around Timbuktu were in the process of forming a self-defense militia under the command of Malian Army Col. Lamana Ould Bdou. On December 26 Moulaye called the Embassy to report that Tuareg rebels presumably loyal to Bahanga were meeting with members of AQIM along the Malian-Mauritanian frontier and that Malian Arabs were "taking necessary precautions" but did not elaborate on what these "precautions" entailed. It now appears that "precautions" means the formation of one or more Arab self-defense militias. Moulaye said this militia would protect members of the Malian Arab community from Tuareg rebels and AQIM. "We've had enough of both of them," said Moulaye. Although Moulaye claimed the militia was comprised of Arabs from Timbuktu to Gao (meaning not only Berabiche but

BAMAKO 00000003 003.2 OF 003

also Kounta and Telemci Arabs), it is likely that the militia to which Moulaye was referring is primarily Berabiche.

10.(C) When asked if the militia would work with the Malian military, similar to the Imghad Tuareg militia created by Malian Col. Elhadj Gamou in May 2008, Moulaye said he did not know and suggested asking the Malian military directly. He then passed the telephone to Col. Lamana. Lamana, who works for the Malian intelligence services and is deeply implicated in northern Mali's smuggling trade, confirmed that he was organizing a Malian Arab self-defense militia around Timbuktu and said the militia's organization was modeled after "what the Americans did in Iraq." On January 5 the Malian newspaper le Republicain reported that Malian Arabs were forming a militia under the command of another Malian army officer, Col. Abdrahmane Ould Mehdou.

Comment: All Not Quiet on New Year's Day

11.(C) The grenade attacks in Gao appear to have been targeted attempts to settle scores with specific Tuareg leaders. While the incidents themselves do not indicate a serious degradation of security within the city of Gao, the brazenness of the attacks suggests that, for an increasing number of northern Malian malcontents, the potential benefits

of taking matters into their own hands are beginning to outweigh the risks. Mali's catch-and-release policy vis-a-vis Ganda-izo members does not seem to have helped matters. The successful return of the ADC to barracks in Kidal would go a long way towards reducing these levels of impunity - provided the return goes as planned. Although the "offensive" of January 2 was hardly worthy of the name, the Malian military does appear to be beefing up its presence in Gao and perhaps Kidal. This shift, however, may have exacerbated the security void in Timbuktu. The creation of an Arab self-defense militia in Timbuktu is a direct response to Bahanga's recent movements along the Mali-Mauritania border and signifies a serious step in the wrong direction. Instead of complimenting the Malian military, as Danna Moulaye and Col. Lamana claim, another ethnic-based paramilitary group led by active duty Malian military officers will only increase levels of uncertainty in the north.

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